



# 5th International Seminar on Security and Defence in the Mediterranean

## Multi-Dimensional Security

Balance

A 'More active' European Union in the Middle East.  
Sven Biscop

### Sven Biscop

*Senior research fellow in the Egmont Institute  
(Royal Institute for International Relations) in Brussels  
and Professor of European security at Ghent University*

In 2003 the European Union (EU) adopted the *European Security Strategy*, the first ever strategic document providing long-term guidance for the whole of EU foreign policy. The Strategy calls for the EU to be 'more active' in pursuing its strategic objectives, through a holistic approach putting to use 'the full spectrum of instruments for crisis management and conflict prevention, including political, diplomatic, military and civilian, trade and development activities'. 'Spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights' should produce 'a world of well-governed democratic states' – this overall method and objective can be described as 'effective multilateralism'.

And active the EU has become, including in the diplomatic and military field. At the time of writing, in early 2007, no less than 11 civilian and military crisis management operations were ongoing in the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), across the globe: the Balkans, Palestine, Sudan, DR Congo, Aceh... Together, these involved about 8.000 troops and 500 civilians. Many more troops from EU Member States, up to 80.000 in total, were simultaneously deployed in other frameworks: on national operations, as UN blue helmets, on NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, and, still, in the coalition of the willing in Iraq. On the diplomatic front, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana, travels around the world as the voice of the EU in preventive diplomacy. The EU together with its Member States already is a global security actor to be reckoned with, much more so than many people realize.

The two probably most salient examples of a 'more active' EU are to be found in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the EU has taken the lead in providing troops for a reinforced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Hopes are that this is the beginning of a renewed activism towards the region, not only on the domestic situation in Lebanon and its relations with Israel, but also on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. In Iran, the 'EU3' (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) are leading negotiations on nuclear proliferation.

Both cases can be seen as positive examples of an EU that is more united and hence 'more active', living up to the ambitions of the *European Security Strategy*. Yet, on closer inspection they also provoke a number of fundamental strategic questions, on the ambitions and potential of EU policy towards the region, but also on the broader issue of the overall scope of the EU as a global strategic actor. These questions the EU inevitably will have to confront if it continues its 'more active' role in the Middle East.

## The EU and the Middle East

The first question that rises concerns the *objectives* of EU policy: which end-state does the EU desire in the Middle East? This immediately leads to the question whether the *instruments* at the disposal of the EU are sufficient to achieve those objectives.

### Iran

With regard to Iran, the short-term objective is to prevent the country from acquiring a military nuclear capacity and ensuring that any civilian nuclear programmes are put under the complete supervision of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). In order to achieve that aim, the EU has consciously opted for negotiations rather than the – immediate – use of force, thus clearly presenting an alternative way of dealing with proliferation issues as compared to the US reaction to the alleged proliferation threat posed by Iraq. Whether this approach will ultimately be successful is difficult to predict. It has been successful so far to the extent that war has been avoided – while according to well-informed sources the US was at some point on the brink of going to war – and that for a while Iran suspended its enrichment activities. To have demonstrated that an alternative way based on 'effective multilateralism' exists, and can be applied in concrete cases, in itself can also be regarded as a success.

Implementing this approach in the case of Iran also raises numerous issues however:

- By its very nature, the process of negotiations is a very drawn-out one. The difficulty is how to judge when negotiations have failed or at least necessitate a next step. Presumably, the EU will show more patience than the US and Israel, but the process can not go on indefinitely either. After the imposition of sanctions by the UN Security Council (UNSC) in December 2006, a new diplomatic initiative is required, for by themselves the sanctions will not lead to a solution.
- In the negotiations, the EU has put rather more emphasis on the proverbial carrot than 'classic' coercive diplomacy. Nevertheless one must ask whether negotiations can only succeed if at the same time diplomacy is backed up by a credible threat of force. For the EU, the question is whether the use of force can be envisaged at all, in view of the ambiguous nature of the case. Iran has the legal right to develop a civilian nuclear capacity. Because of a lack of compliance with the supervision mechanisms provided by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),

the suspicion has arisen that Iran has military intentions, but no positive proof is available. Can force be used without such proof?

- The answer to this question is related to the threat assessment. Is the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran sufficient to warrant military intervention? Apart from the damage to the NPT-regime (which has already been damaged by the US nuclear deal with India), any military threat would be mainly 'South to South', i.e. against Iran's neighbouring countries rather than against the EU. More generally, one should not equate possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) with the intention to use them. Assuming that intervention is technically possible and that the capabilities are available, would the negative effects – strengthening of the regime by providing an external enemy, reinforcing the image of a clash between Islam and the West and furthering radicalization worldwide, and, simply, people getting killed – not be too important? The threat assessment of the EU on the one hand and the US and Israel on the other hand seems to be substantially different.
- The US has subscribed to the EU approach, even though perhaps more out of necessity than out of conviction. More active, positive engagement with Iran from the part of the US would greatly facilitate the process. At the same time, Iran should refrain from negative involvement in Lebanon and the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP).

Less obvious are the EU's long-term objectives vis-à-vis Iran. If the current regime is not much liked in the capitals of Europe, it must be borne in mind that its stance on the nuclear issue is shared by most if not all opposition actors. Is it the EU's aim to promote wider – political, social, economic – reforms in Iran and, if so, how will it go about it?

### **Lebanon and Israel-Palestine**

Unlike Iran, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine are dealt with in the context of the elaborate policy frameworks of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). Even if questions can be asked regarding the desired end-state and the feasibility of the ENP/EMP, notably with regard to the more authoritarian neighbouring countries, these are the three most democratic partners in the Mediterranean, hence EU objectives towards them in the political, social and economic field are both clearer and more feasible. With regard to the security dimension however, even if numerous EU documents clearly state the desired end-state, the feasibility of that solution is much more questionable:

- Past experience shows that only a concerted EU-US initiative has any hope of success in furthering the Middle East Peace Process. It is highly unlikely however that any initiative will be forthcoming from the US side before the 2008 presidential elections. Positive steps in the MEPP could otherwise be linked to negotiations with Iran and the need for it to halt any negative involvement. European and American views on Israel-Palestine remain fundamentally different. The US decision to invade Iraq rather than take an initiative on the MEPP as a way of increasing legitimacy and reform in the Middle East is the clearest example of this divide.

1. SSR: "Security Sector Reform" and DDR: "Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration".

- The question is therefore what the EU can hope to achieve in the absence of an American initiative, first of all with regard to the National Palestinian Authority. The decision to limit relations and support following the Hamas election victory, which contrasted sharply with established EU policy, seems to have been taken under US pressure. A reassessment is now in order, to establish how the EU can most effectively influence developments in the National Palestinian Authority, notably in the field of effective government and prevention of the use of force, making use of the different instruments of support at its disposal.
- The same question – which leverage does the EU have in the absence of US action – poses itself with regard to Lebanon. Through its substantial participation in the enlarged UNIFIL, the EU has certainly increased its presence in the region. The fact itself that various actors called on the EU to provide the core of UNIFIL is proof of its enhanced standing. Yet, UNIFIL will not disarm Hezbollah – it will demilitarize the border region and basically buys time for a political process that should integrate all actors in a democratic Lebanese polity. Only in such a wider political framework can SSR/DDR<sup>1</sup> schemes result in the integration of the armed Hezbollah in a united Lebanese army. Does the EU have the leverage to put this process in motion, given the linkages with outside actors and developments in the broader region, notably on Iran? In any case, the EU should shoulder the responsibility to at least launch such a process, or the window of opportunity will be closed.
- EU-Israel relations seem to have been further strained by recent developments. In Europe, the ongoing use of force in the Palestinian territories is widely seen as disproportionate to the threat and as highlighting the absence of any attempt at constructive engagement. Ongoing incursions into the UNIFIL zone – and incidents such as the firing at a German ship – can also be seen as a lack of constructiveness and pose the question of whether and how the EU – and European forces in UNIFIL – should react.

## The EU as a Global Strategic Actor

The current commitment of the EU in the Middle East is proof of its growing international actorness. Vis-à-vis Iran, the EU is playing a proactive role and is leading the international negotiations – and has been accepted as such by the international community. That an initially reluctant US have subscribed to this approach, and escalation has so far been prevented, is an important achievement. In Lebanon, the scale of the European deployment – 8.000 troops – and the fact that initially the option of making it an ESDP operation was seriously considered – but in the end not pursued because only the UN framework was acceptable to all parties on the ground, while interestingly NATO never was an option – are clear indications of the EU's growing military actorness.

At the same time, its implication in the Middle East highlights a number of broader strategic challenges for the EU which it will have to confront if it continues its development into a fully-fledged global actor.

- In the EU view, the use of force can only be an instrument of last resort and, in principle, with a UNSC mandate, hence e.g. the preference for a diplomatic process of negotiations to settle the Iranian nuclear problem. Inevitably, there will be cases however when it will come to this ultimate stage, when the choice is between inaction and forceful action. The question is whether EU Member States are willing to consider the use of force in an ESDP framework. Even though most Member States do put their forces in harm's way in national, NATO or coalitions-of-the-willing operations, and although legally the Petersberg Tasks include operations at the high end of the spectrum of violence, politically the Member States are still extremely divided over the EU's level of ambition in this field. As Member States rest divided, in crisis situations the EU-level is more often than not out of the loop. Consequently, even though the EU has proven that it can mount high-risk operations if the political will is present, most EU-led operations are of lower intensity and often of smaller scale. The still very young ESDP needs a number of successes to legitimize itself, hence the tendency to select operations with a large chance of success. To some extent therefore the criticism is justified that the EU takes on important but mostly 'easy' operations, in the post-conflict phase, in reaction to the settlement of a conflict – a criticism which can of course be applied to the international community as a whole. One must thus question whether the Member States are willing to fully accept the implications of the strong EU diplomatic support for the principle of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) that was endorsed at the UN Millennium+5 Summit in September 2005. R2P implies that if a State is unable or unwilling to protect its own population, or is itself the perpetrator of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes or crimes against humanity, national sovereignty must give way to a responsibility to protect on the part of the international community. In such cases, the Security Council must mandate intervention, if necessary by military means, which per definition implies high-intensity operations. Does not fully-fledged global actorhood imply the capacity, and the will, to engage in autonomous high-intensity operations if necessary? Which criteria will the EU use to determine whether to engage or not? The EU cannot save the world and intervene in every single crisis, but activation of the R2P mechanism or a crisis in regions of vital interest, including the Middle East, seem to be minimal criteria. But what about the Caucasus or Central Asia, or energy supply?
- The leading role played by the EU3 in the negotiations with Iran led to criticism from other Member States, who felt excluded from the decision-making process, even after the involvement of Solana. Council. Are institutionalized mechanisms needed to deal with such scenarios? Or would the EU Foreign Minister and European External Action Service as provided for in the draft Constitutional Treaty be the answer? In any case, EU engagement in the Middle East once again firmly demonstrates that the Member States can only hope to influence the course of events if they act as one, as EU.
- The US is the most important ally of the EU, with whom it shares basic values and, mostly, overall objectives, though not always the approach to achieve those objectives. More and more, the basic strategic views of the EU and the US are diverging, as is proved by the fact that even the EU Member States that supported the invasion of

Iraq opted for an alternative course of action vis-à-vis Iran. For the greater part, this divergence is likely to be structural. As the EU emerges as a strategic actor in its own right, the alliance with the US has to become more balanced. In the Middle East especially joint EU-US initiatives are in order. Are the current mechanisms for dialogue between Europe and the US sufficient to allow for coordination of policy and, most importantly, to generate new policies?

- The EU as a matter of principle operates via the collective security system of the UN. The UNSC is regarded as the 'ultimate arbiter in the case of non-compliance', as the EU Strategy on WMD words it. This approach can only work if the Permanent 5 at least adopt a non-obstructive, if not a cooperative attitude. The same holds true for the conditionality-based holistic approach and the use of sanctions. The case of Iran is an excellent example. 'Strategic partnership' with Russia and China is thus essential for the implementation of 'effective multilateralism'. How to give more substance to existing partnerships is another challenge for the EU.

## Conclusion

The EU has come a long way in a very short time. But it is not a mature strategic actor yet – as the cases of Iran, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine show, certain doctrines and instruments have to be further developed. The EU's neighbourhood, comprising the Middle East, the Caucasus and extending to the Gulf, comprises many of the most important challenges for the world as a whole. Furthermore, developments in this region are inter-related: policies on Iran, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine are not only mutually dependent, but the room for manoeuvre is also determined by developments in Iraq and Afghanistan. In dealing with its own region, the EU must effectively become a global power.

But the lack of complementarity with current US policy on the region puts the EU for a dilemma. If the EU does now not continue its active policies, the image of powerlessness will be confirmed. If however it does act, but fails because of a lack of constructive US activity, the result will be the same. This dilemma does not contradict the fact that the EU is ever increasing its actorhood, but just confirms that in today's globalized world no one power can solve complex crises by itself – neither the EU, nor the US. The EU cannot afford not to act – and the US must consider whether a failure would really be in its interest.